

Alternatives to the existing CAHSEE for English Learners in California
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California's existing exit exam policy does not satisfy either the standards for fair and valid assessment outlined in the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing or the requirements of NCLB with respect to the assessment of English Learners.

According to the National Academy of sciences, any high stakes educational decision "should not be made solely or automatically on the basis of a single test score. Other relevant information about the student's knowledge and skills should also be taken into account." The Academy's Board on Testing and Assessment also notes that an assessment should be able to determine "whether a students' performance on a test reflects knowledge and skill based on appropriate instruction or is attributable to poor instruction *or to such factors as language barriers* or disabilities unrelated to the skills being tested."

According to NCLB (20 USCS 6311, 2005), ". . .limited English proficient students. . . shall be assessed in a valid and reliable manner and provided reasonable accommodations on assessments administered to such students under this paragraph, including, to the extent practicable, assessments in the language and form most likely to yield accurate data on what such students know and can do in academic content areas, until such students have achieved English language proficiency. . . " Current policy calls for students to be denied a diploma solely on the basis of their score on the CAHSEE without considering other information about students' knowledge and skills and without providing English Learners with reasonable accommodations or the opportunity to demonstrate their content knowledge in a language they understand. California is virtually alone among the 50 states in adopting a single test for high school graduation without exemptions or alternatives. With respect to English Learners, this is especially unfortunate inasmuch as California has the largest EL population in the nation.

More than one-fourth of all California public schools students are English Learners and secondary level English Learners are the fastest growing portion of this population.. They currently represent about 20% of all ELs and this is anticipated to increase. Estimates are that about one of five of these students has entered U.S. schools as an immigrant in the upper grades. This means that many of these students have been educated in their primary language—in most cases Spanish—but that they in all likelihood lack sufficient skills in English to demonstrate what they know. Given that these students have opted to remain in school, despite the serious linguistic challenges they face, the state should have a strong interest in providing incentives for them to stay enrolled and graduate. However, the existence of a single test, administered in a language that they do not fully understand, that can dash their hopes for a high school diploma in spite of the fact that they have done all that has been asked of them by the schools, is a clear *disincentive* to remain in school. We worry that not only will students fail to graduate with a diploma even in cases where they know the subject matter on the

test, but that the system as structured will increase the drop out rate for such students. For this category of students, the incentives are all wrong.

Other states with significant EL populations have attempted to address this issue more thoughtfully than California. New York provides for students to take the Regents exam (their version of the exit exam) in four languages in addition to English, recognizing the large number of immigrant students in their schools, and not wishing to unfairly penalize these students for circumstances out of their control. Oregon and Texas are also experimenting with primary language tests. The New Jersey model allows students to take remedial courses and demonstrate their knowledge in the context of a variety of performance based assessments. The performance tasks clearly reflect the state standards, provide multiple ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, and maintain student effort, engagement, and learning.

At the University of California we are currently experimenting with standards aligned, a –g curricula in both English and Spanish that will allow Spanish speaking students to complete their diploma and college preparatory requirements in both languages. We are also developing end of course exams, aligned with the California standards for each of these a – g classes. The exams are in English and Spanish and certainly exceed the difficulty level of the CAHSEE. We will also be providing these students with intensive English instruction, but a performance based assessment, accommodations, or some form of bilingual assessment would ensure that these same students do not falter on some portion of the exit exam because of a lack of familiarity with particular linguistic forms or vocabulary.

We recommend that the state consider some alternatives to a single, high stakes test in English only to meet both fairness considerations as well as federal mandates. It is in the interest of the state to acknowledge and reward students for what they know, and to help them to stay in school and complete their educations into postsecondary. To accomplish this, we suggest several alternatives:

1. Develop performance assessments that allow students to demonstrate their knowledge in a variety of ways, including culminating projects and tasks that allow students to respond where necessary with explanations in their primary language. Several states have models from which we can borrow, New Jersey's is one excellent example.
2. Allow the use of alternative, rigorous, standards based assessments, such as those being developed by the University of California (among other possibilities) to substitute for the CAHSEE.
3. Provide instructions for all non-English Language Arts items on the CAHSEE (e.g., math) in primary language where feasible (the four major languages spoken in California).
4. Provide special accommodations for EL students on the CAHSEE including reduced linguistic complexity, primary language versions of the test to the extent possible, and glossaries with all key terms in English and primary language.

5. Delay sanctioning EL students who have completed all coursework satisfactorily but who are unable to pass the CAHSEE because of limited English proficiency until such alternatives are established.